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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000297

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
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STATE FOR DRL/IRF, NEA/ARPI, AND CA/OCS/ACS
CAIRO FOR RCO (MEHICKEY)

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MFA CLARIFIES RELIGION NOTE, SAYS NOT DIRECTED AT
AMERICANS

Summary

11. (SBU) Reportedly in reaction to diplomatic missions that had rented space for unsanctioned religious worship, the Foreign Ministry issued a broadly worded circular on February 18 reiterating standing regulations governing non-Muslim places of worship. MFA clarified points of concern to the Embassy, assuring us that no new restrictions were being imposed and that no American citizens were the subject of scrutiny. End summary.

Not Targeted At U.S.

12. (SBU) On February 26, Pol/Econ Chief called on MFA Consular Affairs Department Chief Ambassador Yahya al-Wuhaibi to seek clarification on a February 18 circular he issued to foreign diplomatic missions in Muscat listing regulations governing non-Muslim places of worship in Oman and the proper role of embassies in matters concerning them. Al-Wuhaibi reassured that the circular sought to pull together in one document disparate regulations that had previously been issued by the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs (MARA), which MFA then issued as guidance to diplomatic missions. He also intimated that some foreign missions in Muscat had gone so far as to rent buildings that were converted into places of worship without seeking necessary registration and approval. The circular was targeted at those egregious examples, he explained, and is not indicative of a general clamp-down on non-Muslim places of worship.

New Restrictions?

13. (SBU) P/E Chief raised questions about the circular's statement that "it is not permissible to have gatherings to perform religious practices at residences." (Note: This is known to occur among at least one denomination in Muscat. End note.) Al-Wuhaibi said the circular concerns residences that essentially are in full-time use as places of worship, not homes that occasionally host small groups of co-religionists. He reassured P/E Chief that no American citizens had been identified to him as taking part in objectionable behavior.

14. (SBU) The circular also stated that "foreign missions are not allowed to intervene in any way in the affairs of non-Muslim places of worship, nor receiving delegations from these places of worship, except through coordination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs." P/E Chief noted that any U.S. citizen, even those affiliated with places of worship, has the right to seek the aid of the embassy, and that such access was enshrined in the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations. Al-Wuhaibi acknowledged the U.S. viewpoint, responding that the Embassy should at least notify MFA should any issues come to its attention involving non-Muslim places of worship.

Familiar Red-Lines

15. (U) The circular reiterated known regulations on non-Muslim places of worship, including:

-- non-Muslim places of worship may not be established without prior permission from MARA;

-- places of worship cannot be used for non-religious purposes, nor contribute to, establish, or participate in any association or club whatsoever;

-- places of worship may not carry out activities or publish materials without prior permission from MARA, and distribution of publications are limited to followers of the

same denomination; and

-- MARA remains the entity supervising places of worship and that all dealings and matters required by places of worship shall be handled through MARA.

It should be noted that Muslim places of worship operate under generally similar regulations, but were not addressed in this particular MFA circular.

BALTIMORE